

Revisiting the Philosophy of *Bahala Na* Folk Spirituality

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Abstract:

One of the areas in the discourse on God and secularism is found on the phenomenon of “folk spirituality.” In the Philippines, an important yet undervalued religious theme is found in the expression “Bahala na.” Ambivalently viewed by social scientists throughout local history, its more fatalistic flavor has been more emphasized than its positive attributes. Such paved the way to the attitudes of indolence and irresponsibility in current Filipino worldview and its approach to folk spirituality. This essay argues that *Bahala na* folk spirituality is more than cynical if viewed via recent discussions on the philosophy of God and religion. The paper is focused into two: first, a survey of the major theories on the phenomenon by the social and culture experts, and second, a philosophical interpretation of the manifestations of *Bahala na* in the light of the existentialist framework of faith. This study neither claims nor bolster existing thoughts on *Bahala na*. Instead, it wishes to contribute another facet to the age-old quest for answers on God and religion *via* this unique Filipino folk spirituality.¹

Key terms: *Bahala na*, leap of faith, folk spirituality

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The *Bahala na* Landscape

In the field of Filipino spirituality, one of the important yet undervalued themes is found in the expression “Bahala na.” Ambivalently viewed as both positive and negative by the scholars in culture and local history, the phrase is more considered pessimistically than as a means of communication with the sacred. At first, it connotes hopefulness, sanguinity, and optimism, and, later on, it became more of an expression with fatalistic nuance.

Religious studies expert Jaime Belita etymologically defines *Bahala na* as the shortened “ejaculatory expression of ‘Si Bathala na’.”² “Bathala,” in the account of *Tadhana* by Ferdinand Marcos attributes it to the Tagalog divinity who is “the greatest, towering in power and virtue, above all other gods.”³ Anthropologist F. Landa Jocano sees similar elation to the early Filipino deity pertaining to the qualities of a Hindu omnipotent god worshiped by the Indian traders in the archipelago during the 8th-century.⁴ The same “greatness,” however, brought adverse meaning when identified with the concept of *Bahala na*. As an “omni” god, *Bathala* perpetually takes care of one’s daily concerns, including the most critical. This belief left the individual overly dependent in an impersonal Providence. Thus, the Filipino fatalist divinity worldview.

Historian Sonia Zaide traces this “overdependence” resulting to the irresponsible and passive resignation from the Islamic faith’s total submission to Allah brought to the islands by the 14th-century Muslim missionaries.⁵ A popular view of this theory is opined by the religious scholar Jose De Mesa as he attributes the phenomenon from the juxtaposition of Eastern indigenous animism and the 16th-century Hispanic

² Jaime Belita, C.M., “The ‘Nono’ and the ‘Nino’: A Development of Folk Catholicism as Seen in Hiligaynon Poetry,” in *God Said: HALA!*, ed., Jaime Belita, C.M. (Manila: De La Salle University Press, 1991), 157.

³ Ferdinand Marcos, *Tadhana: History of the Filipino People*, vol. 2 (Manila: [s.n.], 1976), 54.

⁴ F. Landa Jocano, *Folk Christianity* (Quezon City: Trinity Research Institute, 1981), 5.

⁵ Sonia M. Zaide, *Philippine History and Government* (Quezon City: All Nations, 1989), 46.

Western brand of Catholicism.⁶ Clinical psychologist and Jesuit Jaime Bulatao considers the phenomenon as a subconscious fallout of such juxtaposition which he coins, “Split-level Christianity.”⁷ Here, one aims at fulfilling something through a divine assistance yet remains effortless in the hope that the universe shall unfold before oneself.

As it appears, *Bahala na* phenomenon is studied by the social scientists and scarcely explored philosophically.⁸ The nearest philosophical literature on *Bahala na* was published in 2005 by Dr. Rolando Gripaldo of De La Salle University.⁹ A significant contribution of the essay is the comparison between the Western notion of “determinism” and “predestination” (using the Leibnitzian and Spinozian schema) *vis-à-vis* the oriental “fatalism” worldview of *Bahala na*. He finds the latter more comprehensive subsuming the former as mere constitute. Akin to the social scientists, Gripaldo affirms the ambivalence of *Bahala na* where he notably admits the presence of undesirable effects to the behavior among the Filipinos:

Bahala na can be positive (responsibility) or negative (with irresponsibility) in application. It seems to me that Filipino society will be better off if the negative

⁶ José M. de Mesa, “Primal Religion and Popular Religiosity,” *East Asian Pastoral Institute* (2000). Available: <http://eapi.admu.edu.ph>. Accessed: May 15, 2013. See also Leonardo N. Mercado, S.V.D., ed., *Filipino Popular Devotions: The Interior Dialogue Between Traditional Religion and Christianity* (Manila: Logos Publications, Inc., 2000), 13-17.

⁷ Jaime Bulatao, S.J. *Split-Level Christianity* (Quezon City: Capitol Publishing House, Inc., 1966), 1-18.

⁸ For Fr. Catalino Arevalo, S.J., a Filipino theologian and a pioneer of Philippine studies and popular religiosity, there is a scarcity of literature on folk spirituality and needs more explorations not only by the social sciences but in human sciences as well. Cf., Msgr. Jose Clemente F. Ignacio “The Devotion to the Black Nazarene,” *Windhover: The Philippine Jesuits*, (March, 2011).

⁹ Ronaldo M. Gripaldo, “Bahala Na: (Come What May): A Philosophical Analysis,” in *Filipino Cultural Traits: Claro R. Ceniza Lectures* (Washington, D.C.: The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2005) 203-220.



applications were to be avoided or completely obliterated in Filipino decision-making.¹⁰

Bahala na as examined in anthropology, culture, history, sociology and even in philosophy remains tainted with the charges of fatalism, indolence, and irresponsibility. This essay believes that these nuances shall continue to burden the future discussions and may lead to the acceptance of pessimism as inseparable with the understanding of *Bahala na* as folk spirituality. This also argues that *Bahala na* folk spirituality is more than a cynical worldview viewed in the light of the recent discussions on the philosophy of God and religion. The essay invokes the existentialist view of faith as its methodology to achieve this aim.

The Official Cult and the Problem of Folk Spirituality

Missionary Bernard Raas defines “Official Liturgy” as the prescribed cult of the Catholic Church.¹¹ Any form of worship outside it, is thus, “unofficial.” In one hand, the official cult is universal, inspired by a creed, guided by codes for the purpose of preserving the tradition and commandment of Christ, on other the hand, the unofficial cult is individually inspired and subjectively existing in one’s society’s history and culture. Folk spirituality, by virtue of its being instituted by the people, belongs to the unofficial form of worship.

In an essay “Mission in the Context of Filipino Folk Spirituality: *Bahala Na* as a Case in Point,”¹² religious scholar Tereso Casiño meticulously laid the implications of the religious phenomenon to the aims of Christian evangelization in the country. *Bahala na*, he concludes, is precisely “[t]his fatalistic bent, the epitome of Filipino folk spirituality that continues to baffle missionaries today,”¹³ The difficulty arises when it becomes the “all-and-be-all” principle of absolute resignation. Indolence and irresponsibility

¹⁰ Ibid., 217.

¹¹ Bernhard Raas, S.V.D., *Popular Devotions: Making Popular Religious Practices More Potent Vehicles of Spiritual Growth* (Manila: Divine Word Publications, 1992), 14, 19-23.

¹² Tereso C. Casiño, “Mission in the Context of Filipino Folk Spirituality: *Bahala Na* as a Case in Point,” in *Mission Spirituality and Authentic Discipleship*, eds., Wonsuk Ma and Kenneth R. Ross (Oxford: Regnum Books International, 2013), 157-171.

¹³ Ibid., 157.

arise from the idea that individual freedom is minutely insignificant before a pantheistic reality of “Providence.” This, in turn, poses spiritual slavery, wherein, “*Bahala na* depicts a Filipino as a mere automaton whose existence is at the disposal of impersonal forces”; a kind of worldview that presupposes “radical fatalism that operates within a fixed and closed-ended universe.”¹⁴ For Casiño, *Bahala na* as spirituality “produces only an environment of fear and uncertainty”¹⁵ stemming from a misconstrued Christian concept of “Thy will be done.”¹⁶ *Bahala na* as folk spirituality, therefore, has become a “convenient theodicy for Filipinos” amidst the onslaught of the pressing needs of modern living. Casiño explains:

. . . a Filipino’s response to crisis and hardships is epitomized by the expression, *bahala na*. . . In order to survive, a Filipino toys with fatalism as a means of easing the pain of his or her circumstances as well as lessening the burden of his existence.¹⁷

A concrete manifestation of these difficulties is observed every 9th of January during the Black Nazarene folk ritual called *Traslación*.¹⁸ During the procession, barefooted men (and few courageous women) physically find their way to get close to the image out of the numerous claims of miracles the statue brings. Millions of devotee flock in Quiapo risking their lives to perform the cult. When asked if they are ready for the ritual, many of the respondents during the field interviews, replied: “*Bahala na*.”

Raas also enumerates the dangers inherent in the practice of folk spirituality. First, it “can become more important than the liturgy.”¹⁹ The practice appeals to the devotees as they express faith convenient to their ways and as avoidance with the rigidity and dullness of the liturgical

¹⁴ Ibid., 163.

¹⁵ Ibid., 171.

¹⁶ Ibid., 163.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ A popular devotion commemorating the 1787 transfer of a 17th-century life-size wooden image of a suffering Christ, from its original Augustinian church in Intramuros, Manila to its present basilica in the Quiapo district.

¹⁹ Raas, *Popular Devotions*, 21.

services.²⁰ Second, novenas, processions and other popular practices “can be one-sided and as such, they can cause people to develop false priorities and values.”²¹ At the Quiapo Basilica, the number of Churchgoers during Fridays is much greater compared to the total number of all Sundays in a year.²² Religious scholar Wilfredis Jacob confirms this in her study of Quiapo religious experience observes: “this devotion and the devotional prayers, specifically the novena prayer, do not provide any specific attention to the role of Christ’s resurrection and glorification.”²³ Third, “the danger of too much subjectivism, externalism, and sentimentalism”²⁴ may disregard the creedal truths and liturgical practices of the Catholic Church (confession, Eucharistic celebration, receiving Holy Communion).²⁵ Fourth, the “popular devotions can give wrong feeling of security in the presence of the living God” for it may bring false hopes and at the same time degrades the perfection and supremacy of God in a level of commerce; as if faith is a matter of depositing prayers and withdrawing granted wishes. Raas quotes

²⁰ In 2014, the Eucharistic celebration presided by Manila Archbishop Luis Antonio Cardinal Tagle was halted due to the literal “hi-jacking” of the “andas” (the platform where the Black Nazarene is stationed) by some passionate devotees. They initiated the procession even before the celebration was over. The clerics were forced to vacate the stage and conclude the mass at the dug out of the Quirino Grandstand in Rizal Park. Paterno Esmaguél II, “Devotees hijack Mass, take Nazarene,” *Rappler.com*, January 9, 2014. Available: <http://www.rappler.com/nation/>. Accessed: January 18, 2014.

²¹ Raas, *Popular Devotions*, 21.

²² As observed in many churches in the country, Filipinos frequent local churches more during the *Misa de Gallo* during advent or prefer to attend the Holy Thursday and Good Friday rituals (such as *Visita Iglesia* and recitation of the stations of the Cross) than the Easter Sunday Christening mass.

²³ Wilfredis B. Jacob, S.Sp.S., “Religious Experience in the Quiapo Black Nazarene Devotion,” in *Filipino Religious Psychology*, ed. Leonardo N. Mercado, S.V.D. (Tacloban City: Divine Word University Publications, 1977), 88.

²⁴ Raas, *Popular Devotions*, 22.

²⁵ Observable at the West portion of the Quiapo Church are movable candle stations where devotees offer personal prayer requests through the popular practice of “pasindi” (candle lighting) ritual. The candles vary in colors and shapes of a human figure depending on one’s personal wish. This sort of expression of faith may appear untenable to the rubrics of the official cult but personally valuable to the believer.

the *Sacramentary*: “our praise of thanksgiving adds nothing to your greatness.”²⁶ Fifth, there is also a danger for folk spirituality to “easily degenerate into magical or superstitious practices or even idolatry.”²⁷ The last danger Raas points out is doctrinal, since folk spirituality “can be abused for other purposes like moralizing or didactic intentions.”²⁸ Jacob further notes that “there are also devotees who lead questionable moral lives, who take devotion as a means of material and temporal assistance”²⁹ since in their hearts is the belief that faith alone leads to salvation.

Moreover, Raas states that a certain folk spirituality may merit the recognition of the Catholic Church (yet remains “unofficial”), if and only if, the rituals must: first, be in harmony with the liturgical seasons, second, in accord with the sacred liturgy, and third, derived from the liturgy and leads people to it.³⁰ All of these requisites, however, are absent in the *Traslación* devotion. Instead, the ritual consistently results in alarming statistics of damaged to properties, physical injuries, and casualties.³¹

²⁶ “Preface” *Sacramentary*, 40. Cf., *ibid.*, 22.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 22.

²⁹ Jacob, “Religious Experience in the Quiapo Black Nazarene Devotion,” 89.

³⁰ Second Vatican Council, “Sacrosanctum Concilium,” 13. Cf., Raas, *Popular Devotions* 20.

³¹ The data provided by the local news, government and private agencies from 2004 (with 300,000 participants) to 2016 (with 12 million participants), indicates that there are 8,583 injuries (lacerations, back pain, chest pain, abdominal pain, sprain, headache, exhaustion, dehydration, dizziness, fainting, difficulty in breathing, hypertension, seizures, vomiting, possible fracture and cuts in different parts of the body) and 11 casualties recorded (due to cardiac arrest, acute coronary syndrome, electrocution, suffocation and strangulation). Cf. Philstar.com/Efigenio Toledo I, “Nazarene feast: 2 dead, 1,200 injured,” *The Philippines Star Global* (January 9, 2016). Available: <http://www.philstar.com/headlines/>. Retrieved: January 10, 2016; Cf. Charmie Joy Pagulong, “Timeline: Deaths, injuries during Quiapo procession,” *The Philippine Star* (January 8, 2012). Available: <http://www.philstar.com/>. Accessed January 18, 2014; Philippines News Agency, “2014 ‘Traslacion’ of the Black Nazarene takes almost 19 hours,” *INTERAKSYON.com* (January 10, 2014). Available: <http://www.interaksyon.com/ar>. Accessed: January 11, 2014; Aries Joseph Hegina and Bong Lozada, “2 dead, 2 hurt by electric shock in 19-hour Black Nazarene

Despite the real and doctrinal shortcomings of the Black Nazarene folk spirituality, it continues to attract believers and shows no sign of decline in years to come. This is due to the devotee's mindset which works on the premise that "[as] long as I express my faith to the *Señor*, all shall be given. . . . *Bahala na* for what may come." Thus, the obliteration in lives and properties have become necessary repercussions of the fatalistic worldview of *Bahala na* folk spirituality.

The Case of Imon³²

In an interview with Raymond "Imon" Gappi conducted during the *Traslación* 2015, his description of his own religious experience suggests elements of folk spirituality. Imon is a 44-year-old architect and an OFW based in Jubail, Saudi Arabia. He is a devotee for twenty-four years at that time and the founder-head of the Balangay *Antigong Mamasan*. The group, along with the *Hijos del Nazareno* in Quiapo Basicila, aims to safeguard the antiquated image away from the overly enthusiastic devotees throughout the procession. According to Imon, the 2015-*Traslación* is unforgettable due to his unintended documentation of the last forty minutes of Renato Gurion (44 years old and a fellow devotee and *Hijos* who died of cardiac arrest during the first hour of the procession at the Quirino Grandstand in Rizal Park. Imon was the one who brought the almost lifeless body of Gurion to the nearby hospital until the latter expired eventually. When Imon was asked whether he will continue the devotion, as expected and without hesitation, he replied:

" . . . *Kasama eto duon sa panata mo na whatever na maging resulta niyan o maging outcome niya e alam mo na kasama ito duon sa panalangin mo, kasama ito sa debosyon mo. . . . Hindi magiging sagabal o isang paraan ito para hindi ituloy, personal na desisyon 'yon. Hindi ako matatakot o hindi ako made-deprive na sumalang ulit. . . .*"³³

'traslacion,'" *INQUIRER.net* (January 10, 2015). Available: <http://newsinfo.inquirer.net/>. Accessed: January 10, 2015.

³² For the purpose of this essay, only one case out of (35 cases) shall be discussed.

³³ Raymond Gappi, *Researcher's Interview*. (Skype Video Call, March 6-7, 2015, 1059PM-12:34AM). Emphasis added.

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The response reveals significant elements describing *Bahala na* as folk spirituality:

First, the certitude of the *uncertainty*. The devotee's unwavering faith in an "impersonal Providence" happens during the absurd situation, i.e., one aims to be saved while exposing oneself to risk. The mute image of Christ personifies the omnipotent *Bathala* who takes charge of one's fate during the lethal exercise of worship. Contrary to the "enslaving spirituality" attached to *Bahala na*, the devotee is free and willfully accepts all possibilities that may arise out of the expression of faith. In this majestic yet chaotic procession, one stands before the endless possibilities holding a personal wish from petty to magnanimity.³⁴ Part of this possibility is obtaining a permanent injury or death during the observance of ritual and yet a devotee is unwavering despite perils. Such is the case since operating within the devotee is a *Bahala na*-mindset and spiritual framework which is easily mistaken as fatalist foolishness; rather, an endeavor of absolute trust to the omnipotence of one's object of faith. *Bahala na* in this context is the language of making impossible things possible.

Second, the act of believing is deeply *personal* that only the individual is capable of comprehending. Each year, the procession appears absurd to the both local and foreign observers but remains highly meaningful to the believer. This "unofficial" cult brings in millions of followers out of a wisdom exclusive to each. Cardinal Luis Antonio Tagle in his homily before the devotees mentioned: "to understand it, you need to be a devotee (because) outsiders do not understand."³⁵ *Bahala na* in this context is an expression out of a lack of verbal description to what one ineffably perceived on what God is capable of.

The third is *passion*. This pertains to the inward strength that fuels the devotee's dynamism and vitality before an almost impossible human act of worship. Imon, together with the rest of the informants responded unilaterally when asked until when they shall continue their *panata* (sacred vow): "*Hangga't makakaya ko*" or in some occasions, "*Kung 'di man, ipapasa ko*

³⁴ Requests ranges from finding a partner, winning a lottery bet, to the acquisition of the long-cherished promotion, an approved visa application; or being united with a lost relative, or even a complete healing of one's terminal illness.

³⁵ Luis Antonio Cardinal Tagle, quoted in Jeannette Andrade et al., "Millions Defy Terror Alert," *INQUIRER.net* January 10, 2012, Available: <http://newsinfo.inquirer.net>. Accessed: November 28, 2013.

aking mga anak.” Here, the *Bahala na* spirituality serves as a “life-long trust” on the divinity making the religious experience a perpetual observance of duty to God.

The *Bahala na* folk spirituality in the context of the Black Nazarene popular devotion manifests a spiritual framework of a religious experience characterized by a *personal* trust towards the uncertain. The object of uncertainty is the source of a dynamic strength that proceeds from one’s *inward* and *passionate* religiosity. This folk spirituality is a lifetime performance of *panata* to be observed as an impossible task before God in the light of one’s faith.

***Bahala na* and the “Leap of Faith”: A Manifestation of Existential Faith**

Popularized in the English-speaking world as the “leap of faith,” the phrase originates from a passage in Søren Kierkegaard’s monumental work *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*:

Faith is the *objective uncertainty* with the *repulsion of the absurd*, held fast in the *passion of inwardness*, which precisely is the relation of inwardness raised to the highest power.³⁶

The definition involves three elements in order to achieve a genuine faith: first is the “objective uncertainty” or the *indeterminacy* of the object of faith. In the moment of faith, one finds no rational calculation to the possibilities one may receive. Second, the “passion of inwardness” explains the *subjective* nature of the experience of faith. Since an act of faith involves no rational consideration (but not necessarily antithetical to reason), the individual engages a personal and subjective appropriation with the object of faith. This pertains to the source of the utmost dynamism experienced by the believer. Third, the “repulsion of the absurd” (as this study suggests) illustrates the *movement of faith* during a religious experience. The individual performs a dual act of faith: the *resignation* of one’s everything and the *receiving* of one’s meaning.

A closer look at the fatalistic tendencies of “Bahala na” folk spirituality (“overly dependent on some impersonal force”) shows the

³⁶ Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to the Philosophical Crumbs*, 514. Italics added. Henceforth CUP.



believer's absolute trust to the unknown object of faith (God). In the context of "leap of faith," the "trust" is never blind since it is grounded on one's full awareness of the endless possibilities one may receive in the process of faith. This is the faith involved in the *Bahala na* folk spirituality which is neither indolent nor irresponsible manifestation of spiritual slavery. The individual is active as he/she engages and creates a *subjective*, *passionate*, and *inward* way of communicating with the divine. It is here, *Bahala na* spirituality appears as the highest expression of faith where one deliberately chooses a concrete act of "leap" into the abyss of uncertainty. Such is what Casiño and the social scientists describe as the "impersonal force" of a "faceless providence"³⁷ when pertaining to the actual experience of the "unknowable" humanly speaking yet bespeaks of the true nature of the sacred. The communication involved is extremely personal that only a devotee is capable of comprehending a "private language" between the object of faith and subject-believer.

***Bahala na* as "Faith by Virtue of the Absurd"**

Kierkegaard examines the Biblical hero Abraham epitomizing the "knight of faith" for his absolute trust in God *via* a kind of "faith by virtue of

³⁷ "*Bahala na* derives from a fatalistic worldview. The vague conceptualization of God by pre-Spanish Filipinos resulted in a belief that is still prevalent in the contemporary Philippine society. Accordingly, everything that happens is predetermined by an impersonal force or supernatural powers. On the basis of predetermined events, Filipinos try their best to forecast future events in order to avoid the curse of *palad* (fate). Because *palad* is faceless, Filipinos struggle to find ways to cope with life's inevitable events and circumstances. So they end up surrendering to the impersonal forces of the universe. Fatalism operates within the broader spectrum of Philippine society, and many Filipinos view *bahala na* as a psychological necessity more than a philosophy of life. Others perceive *bahala na* as primarily an ethical spirituality – a proper religious behavior in line with the will of an impersonal force known as *Bathala*. However, Filipinos conceptualize *Bathala* in plain anthropomorphism, an impersonal force that possesses 'a will.' Whenever people face difficulty in determining *Bathala's* will, they exert extra efforts to maintain proper behavior. In this sense, a Filipino may know that he or she conforms to the will of *Bathala* by reading and interpreting one's karma, a practice that is mostly done on a trial-and-error basis." Casiño, "Mission in the Context of Filipino Folk Spirituality," 165.

the absurd.”³⁸ Absurd, viewed in the common sense understanding pertains to that which is unreasonable or something foolish. Kierkegaard, however, maintains that such illogicality is the only possible lens to see the authentic experience of God revealing itself to a devoted believer. This is where the *meaning* of one’s existence is received through faith. Kierkegaard writes:

. . . he [Abraham] had faith that God would not demand Isaac of him, and yet he was willing to sacrifice him if it was demanded. He had faith by virtue of the absurd, for human calculation was out of the question, and it certainly was absurd that God, who required it of him, should in the next moment rescind the requirement. He climbed the mountain, and even in the moment when the knife gleamed he had faith—that God would not require Isaac. No doubt he was surprised at the outcome, but through a double movement he had attained his first condition, and therefore, he received Isaac more joyfully than the first time.³⁹

What is irrational in this situation is not anymore the willingness of Abraham sacrificing the only son but the strongest belief that he shall “receive Isaac” back “more joyfully than the first time.” Such is incomprehensible save a kind of “faith by virtue of the absurd.” “It is possible,” C. Stephen Evans explains, “for God to encounter a person directly . . . provide a new self, a new identity, and a new understanding of the purpose of human existence.”⁴⁰ Due to the unintelligibility of Abraham’s act of sacrifice to reason, the divine ordeal becomes an act of genuine faith possible *via* a qualitative “leap.” Through this kind of faith, man transcends earthly values towards the realm of the Eternal; a *telos* higher than the codes understandable to the society.

³⁸ Søren Aabye Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling/Repetition*, eds. and trans., Howard Hong and Edna Hong (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1983), 35-36; 37, 50. Henceforth FT.

³⁹ FT, 35-37.

⁴⁰ C. Stephen Evans, “Faith as the Telos of Morality: A Reading of Fear and Trembling,” in *International Kierkegaard Commentary*, vol.6 – *Fear and Trembling and Repetition*, ed., Robert L. Perkins (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1993), 23.

The *Bahala na* spirituality is the “faith by virtue of the absurd” since it is the “absolute relation to the absolute.”⁴¹ The individual enters a total submission of an unadulterated duty (not irrational but *beyond* rational) towards God. The process is tedious and impossible “humanly speaking” because the truth is unveiled neither through the human intelligence nor a simple act of goodness, but solely through the “leap” into something that provides nothing but “uncertainty” (viewed by the commonsense understanding).⁴² Here, *Bahala na* spirituality is the total submission worth risk-taking for it is one’s own existential meaning that is obtained concealed to many but clearly visible to oneself.

“Faith by virtue of the absurd” is what Kierkegaard calls as the “new category for understanding”⁴³ capable of grasping existential truths; a method of a true Christian defined by a total submission to the absurdity of God’s will.⁴⁴ During the *Bahala na* religious experience, a devotee is faced with the object of faith and surrenders everything by way of a total trust in God, or concretely put, “*Si Bathala na.*” *Bahala na* is a personal and subjective trust in the absurdity that makes “Abraham greater than everybody.”⁴⁵ This enables an individual devotee to discover the secret that unlocks the mystery of “divine insanity.”⁴⁶ “*Bahala na*” is the expression behind “leap of faith” that made Abraham “greatest of all, whose strength is powerlessness, wisdom whose secret is foolishness, a hope whose form is madness, and the love which is hatred of oneself.”⁴⁷

Bahala na, Double Movement of Faith and the Possibility of “Miracles”

Central to the theme of *Fear and Trembling* is the notion of the *movement of faith*. Kierkegaard claims that the movement of faith involves two conditions: first, the *infinite resignation* or the act of renouncing everything for the sake of a higher *telos* through an ordeal (suffering); and

⁴¹ FT, 71ff.

⁴² FT, 46-47.

⁴³ FT, 48-49, 60.

⁴⁴ FT, 42.

⁴⁵ FT, 14.

⁴⁶ FT, 20.

⁴⁷ FT, 16-17.

secondly, *double movement of faith* where the “repulsion” of the Absurd grants the *meaning* to a devoted believer (reward). The first *movement* is explained by the tragic heroes (Jephthah, Brutus, and Agamemnon) representing the “knights of resignation” sacrificed their children for a reason (one’s love for country, justice, and honor).⁴⁸ In the second condition, *the knight of faith*, personified by Abraham who sacrificed his only son, Isaac, for *no reason* to human language except as an act of murder or plain insanity. On one hand, the *knights of resignation* remain within the bounds of the ethical (worldly understanding), while on the other hand, the *knight of faith* leaps into the abyss of absurdity fueled by faith and eventually discovers the meaning of life anew.

A closer look at the *double movement of faith* reveals a possible elucidation of the phenomenon of “miracle.” This is revealed in the phrase “repulsion of the absurd”⁴⁹ found in the definition of the Kierkegaardian “faith.” During a religious experience, one trusts amidst uncertainty by a total surrender, e.g., one’s own son, wealth, time, honor, knowledge, morality, etc., including one’s own life. In return, i.e., by way of repulsion, God provides what is store for one’s faith. What is repulsed, as this study suggests, is the *meaning of one’s life* obtained when one possesses a kind of faith by virtue of the absurd. This is the “miracle” in the Kierkegaardian faith as it violates the natural course of human reason for a higher truth. In the case of Abraham, he miraculously received back Isaac, fathered all nations, inherited the Promised Land, continued his legacy, restored his honor, and became a blessing to many nations. The process of making impossible possible becomes possible *via* the individual’s “faith by virtue of the absurd” realized in one’s *subjectivity*, *passion*, and *inward* experience of meeting the paradoxicality of Christ. Kierkegaard further points out that a “miracle” of this sort also happens in the present age. He remarks: “for *our generation* does not stop with faith, does not stop with the miracle of faith, turning water into wine—it goes *further* and turns wine into water”⁵⁰.

The January 9, 2015 *Traslación* becomes the most significant moment in the life of a fifteen-year devotee, Erlinda Dizon. Her yearly *panata* (devotion) is intended for her 39-year-old son named Alexander who

⁴⁸ FT, 57-61.

⁴⁹ CUP, 514.

⁵⁰ CUP, 37. *Italics*, added.

suffers difficulty in speaking and chronic memory loss.⁵¹ On July 11, 2014, Alexander got lost while having a meal in a fast food chain in Pasig City. After six months of failed search, Erlinda joins the annual *Traslación* with a very personal request: to find what she considers her *everything*, her *life*: her son, Alexander. As the snail's pace procession headed towards the corner of Burgos Street and Roxas Boulevard, she witnessed a man being trodden and trampled upon by the nearing sea of devotees. Out of pity, she pulled the man to safety just in time before the jostling crowd approaches. Albeit, bald, darkened, toothless and stiffer in physique, she was certain with the scar on the man's leg belonging to Alexander's. Erlinda found her lost son amidst the sea of devotees on the feast of the Black Nazarene, her 67th birthday. This account belongs to one of the countless personal claims of *himala* (Tagalog for "miracle") by the devotees.

This *himala* is the meaning concealed behind uncertainty experienced in the *Bahala na* spirituality. In Erlinda's subjective worldview, his mentally and physically challenged son is "everything." Thus, the loss of Alexander is the loss of her life's meaning. Kierkegaard writes: "the one who lost the beloved has in a sense lost sons and daughters . . . honor and pride and along with it the vitality and meaning of life."⁵² In virtue of *Bahala na* equipped with "faith by virtue of the absurd," Erlinda surrenders all: her weakened and aged body into the den of a "collective frenzy of masculine strength."⁵³ At that instant, she obtained *himala* by receiving her son back in the guise of (a birthday) gift as a repulsion of the absurd. Her decision is not on "human calculation" but on a "leap" which is a gesture of *Bahala na* hidden in a special kind of wisdom only she and the Nazarene Christ understand; a "category of understanding" not comprehensible to all but *meaningful* to the one who believes.

⁵¹ "Ang hirap po ng buhay namin. Maysakit siya (Alexander) may cancer. Siya talaga ang ipinamamanata ko." Erlinda Dizon, "Mom Finds Missing Son during Black Nazarene Procession," interviewed by Johnson Manabat, *ABSCBN-DZMM* (January 9, 2015). Available: dzmm.com.ph. Accessed: January 10, 2015.

⁵² FT, 198-199.

⁵³ Jose Alain Austria, "Hijos de Enero Nueve: The Black Nazarene Procession as a Male Rite of Passage," paper presented at the *20th Annual Manila Studies Conference* (Manila: Manila Studies Association and the National Commission for Culture and the Arts, 2012).

Bahala na spirituality, in the context of *himala* is the secret of Abraham's faith whose "wisdom is foolishness" that "fits only the one who has faith, no one else, not a lover, or an enthusiast, not a thinker, but solely the one who has faith, who relates to the absolute paradox."⁵⁴ The absolute dependence to the *Señor* is the *Bahala na* attitude that confronts the paradox of transcendence and immanence. A spirituality in concreteness; dark but majestic, suffering yet liberating, fallen but a resilient image of a Filipino Christ. *Bahala na* spirituality is realized when one sees confidence and trust to the strength emanating from a wooden image of power at its weakest. *Bahala na* spirituality becomes the fountain source of strength for the *masa* standing tall at the society's periphery. Thus, the Black Nazarene folk spirituality is an expression of the incommunicable *leap* through *Bahala na*. This also signifies the *masa's* (common folks) inarticulate way of communicating the immensity of the divine power in the present day Filipino context of religiosity.

Albeit the parallelism between Elinda's case and Abraham is presumptuous and may not capture the details of the latter's decisiveness during the ancient time in Mount Moriah, the *Bahala na* attitude during the Black Nazarene ritual affirms the Patriarch's *double movement of faith* (*resignation* of everything and *receiving* everything). As a folk spirituality, *Bahala na* is a recognition of confronting the possibilities of reality, including those that go beyond human speculation. This is precisely the "personal miracle" of those whose strength rest in the very hope of making impossible things possible as to how they do not know except trust. Casiño surprisingly points to this when he writes:

The risk-taking spirit epitomized by *bahala na* is characterized with hope because many Filipinos, even in extreme difficulties, hope for the best. When conditions are tough, the Filipino spirit of courage blends well with strong hope. In worst times the *Filipino spirit is unbending and tends to dare the impossible*.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ CUP, 514.

⁵⁵ Casiño, 161. Emphasis added.

Conclusion

Bahala Na is undeniably a Filipino trait that has become not only an expression but a maxim of daily life. As folk spirituality, it is a manifestation of faith realized when an individual performs the total submission to a divine providence during certain (and oftentimes desperate) cases affecting one's material/spiritual life. The notion of *faith* found in the Kierkegaardian literature implies a *passionate, subjective, and inward* manifestation of one's authentic faith. It may appear irrational to the observers yet truly meaningful to the individual believer by way of a *leap*, i.e., an individual choice towards the absurd guided solely by faith.

Similarly, the *Bahala na* folk spirituality appears contrary to reason or even un-Christian to some experts, yet, this provides an individual the chance to experience pure and personal communication with the sacred. *Bahala na* is the *leap of faith* that quenches one's thirst for life's meaning. The devotees fortify this claim that in the moment of uncertainties, a man of faith risks everything, including own life as an expression of trust. In return, devotees receive material and spiritual blessings, and in many cases, the impossible in human terms. Thus, the *himala*.

Bahala na as a folk spirituality is neither a manifestation of blind faith nor an expression of an indolent justification or procrastination of one's life-responsibilities; rather, it is a pure and personal expression of a profound belief towards God.

From the foregoing, the study further concludes that the *Bahala na* folk spirituality is philosophically tenable and may contribute anew to the existing theories offered by the social, cultural, and religious experts as regards understanding this unique Filipino spirituality.

Limits and Implications

The *Bahala na* folk spirituality as a manifestation of Kierkegaardian existentialist faith may not account for the validity and authenticity of all the religious experiences of the millions of devotees during the annual *Traslacion* feast. However, a careful reading of the Kierkegaardian "leap" and the keen observation of the devotion may shed light on the present understanding of the *Bahala na* folk spirituality. As this study suggests, there is more to what the fatalism theories offer as regards the phenomenon, for it may also serve as a meaning-seeking-opportunity that enables one to fulfill personal search for meaning. This shall inspire one to pursue life especially

during times of tribulations and sufferings. Since, the majority of the devotees belong to the *masa* whose ways may not be always amiable to the lens of the educated few, the *Bahala na* folk spirituality shall serve as a silent voice of the present day folks at the social margins whose spirituality is existent predating prehistoric archipelago, and hence, worthy to be recognized in order to develop more effective means that will serve rightfully the Christian missionary aims of today's Filipino faith.

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